

“Leaven”

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First United Methodist Church of Wausau
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Matthew 13:33

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Maybe it’s because of my family history of baking, but I’ve always liked this short parable Jesus offers today. Many times I’d come home from school as a child or in my youth to find loaves of fresh bread cooling on the counter, just waiting to be sliced and slathered with butter, or maybe some of my mother’s blackberry jam.

Bread baking is simple chemistry really. You take the right amounts of key ingredients at the right temperatures, combine them in the correct manner, then allow the resulting mixture time to set. You apply heat... Or mix, let raise covered, bake.

Not surprisingly, this parable offers more than we notice at first glance. We’ve been looking at Jesus’ parables this summer, working to discover old truths and notice new ways God is calling us to live them. We’ve looked at the lost and the found; we’ve thought about the things that hold us back and what true freedom in Christ means; we’ve compared what’s fair with what’s right and been reminded that – just as God does – we are to aim for what is right.

These simple stories are not so simple. They’re Trojan horse parables, stories which seem interesting and fun; so we take them in. Yet inside are truths we might not like but which God knows we need to hear and accept. Today’s lesson is no exception.

Bread, and food, show up regularly in the gospel accounts. “Give us this day our daily bread” reminds people that God provided manna in the wilderness and will continue to provide for people’s needs; it also speaks of God’s future as a great banquet, in which “People will come from east and west, north and south, and sit down to eat in God’s kingdom.” In Greek, the word *daily* as in *our daily bread* actually has a “for the future” connection.

And where is Jesus laid when he’s born? A Manger, a feeding trough. He regularly connects with people, anybody, over meals. He feeds thousands who come to hear him. He compares his body to bread. A couple generations later, the gospel writer John writes that Jesus is the “bread of life.”

As with all of Jesus’ parables, this one has had many interpretations. Some are hard to swallow. Other are just lukewarm. Ideas like: “From insignificant beginnings, God creates God’s realm, embracing all of God’s children.” “Just as yeast works to leaven the dough, so the growth of God’s kin-dom is inevitable.” “God’s rule, like yeast, working in a hidden way, will pervade one’s life, giving it new quality.” These are not bad, but do we really need a parable to tell us that God’s kin-dom is mighty? Surely there are better ways to reassure us that God is working in the life of the world? Also, leaven is not insignificant.

There are other interpretations that comment on Judaism’s failure to accept what Jesus offers or say that God’s new covenant negates the old one, yet Jesus says just the opposite.

In today's study of this short parable, I'd like us to consider the ingredients – yeast, a woman and what she did, and three measures of flour.

In ancient times, people didn't have little packets of yeast on their freezer doors. Yeast or leaven was actually sourdough. Sourdough starter is created by exposing a flour and water mixture to the air. Native yeast spores enter, their enzymes break down the flour's starch converting it to glucose. I used to use store-bought yeast to speed up the process. The starter is ready when it has a "pleasant sour smell." You use this starter or sponge to leaven your future baking – loaves of bread, muffins, pancakes... Keep this picture of leaven in mind as we compare God's kin-dom to yeast.

Sourdough can be bad or good. (The bad stuff is icky!) Jesus must have known this when he told his disciples to "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees." After fasting in the wilderness, Jesus affirms that one does not live by bread alone. He's not dismissing the importance of food but he's clear about his focus to a two-pronged life, of bread (all that is physical) and of God's intention.

Sourdough was a staple in Jewish kitchens. Bread was a regular Temple offering. Only during Passover was it removed from homes. Yes, yeasts are good and bad, but for anyone who has ever eaten bread, mostly good.

Now to the woman and what she did. Looking at the traditional wording – let's read that first version in your bulletins together, "He told them another parable:

'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'" You might reason that the yeast is the focus. Maybe, but in the *Gospel of Thomas* this story reads that God's realm is "like a woman who took a little leaven, [hid] it in dough, and made it into large loaves." Maybe we can go either way.

Notice, though, what she does. Most translations say she mixes the yeast in. But the Greek doesn't say *mixes*; it says *hides*, using the same word that *encryption* comes from. Let's read the second version... "Similar to the kingdom of heaven is leaven that a woman, taking, hid in three measures of flour until was leavened all." This woman is doing something in secret but, more than that, she's hiding something precious (that's what yeast is) that needs to be uncovered. Think of Jesus' warning not to hide your light under a basket.

Going to those three measures of flour. How much do you suppose that is? ... Three measures is something between 40 and 60 pounds, eight to twelve bags like this, much more than any person could knead on their own, far more than any family could eat. I've talked about hyperbole before, exaggerating to make a point. Jesus is speaking of abundance, or probably better, extravagance. Like the story of turning 60 gallons of water into good wine or feeding thousands with only two fish and five loaves.

Without going into details, today's parable connects with the OT story of Abraham and his three visitors. "Let me offer you a little bread," he says. Then he runs inside and tells his wife, "Hurry! Knead three measures of choice flour and make some cakes!" And, especially for all you word lovers, the Greek word for *cakes* comes from the same root as the word for *hidden*, (*enkrypsias*).

What does all this mean? I mean if you're a curious person this stuff might be interesting, but what would God have us take away from today's lesson? I'd like to suggest three possibilities.

First, could one message be that we need to reconsider which things, and which people, do or do not have spiritual potential?

Can it be that the most mundane and even the negative can be used by God for God's good intention? Granted, we know this. Yet it's easy to forget in our day-to-day living so it's good that Jesus compares God's realm not only to hidden treasure, pearls and banquets but also fishing net, sprouting seeds and yeast.

A second possibility is that, given the enormous yield one would get from ten bags of flour, this parable has to be speaking about the importance of extravagance and generosity. We are invited to live our lives in light of God's kin-dom, each to do a certain something that might seem foolish to others. Abraham invited strangers to dinner. Maybe yours is setting up a food pantry. Or baking enough bread to feed the hungry ones who wonder about us well-fed folks who pray, "Give us this day our daily bread."

The woman in today's parable does something in secret, baking more bread than she and her family can possibly eat. Maybe she might also have a say in who gets to share in this bounty.

Lastly, maybe this story of God's kin-dom is again a reminder that in spite of our ideas of golden sidewalks and harps in a great somewhere, God's heaven, on earth at least, is when everyone has enough to eat. And that the kingdom is present in everything, from the sourdough sponge and the Japanese beetles to the rain and sunshine. And is for everyone.

And that is the way God intends it.